

5-6-1970

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Recommended Citation

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from the office of
Senator Edward M. Kennedy
of Massachusetts

REMARKS OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY - JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

For Release 8:00 P.M.
Wednesday, May 6, 1970

It is a distinct pleasure for me to have the opportunity to inaugurate this historic series at Johns Hopkins. I know I need not dwell on the personal significance that I attach to a lecture so named. Suffice it to say that I always consider it most proper that such expressions of a memorial to my brothers be in this form -- at a University and among the young. For both my brothers had an affinity for the young; whether it was what they saw in young minds, in the idealism of youth, in the freedom of expression, in that bottomless well of hope that is so much more prevalent at your age than at mine -- whatever it was they saw, the bond was created. The President called upon the young to serve, to give, to contribute selflessly and they responded to him. Later, the young called upon his brother, the Senator, to serve, to give, to contribute selflessly -- and he responded to them. And I feel, and I hope you share the view, that we are all better for it, that we are all fortunate they lived -- for their experiences and efforts are, I believe, an addition to a better understanding of what this country is, and what it can be.

As you are well aware, most men in public life often begin their remarks by stressing how fateful it is that you are to be addressed in a moment of challenge -- a moment when there is great crisis, before you and this nation. This is often said to add weight to the words that are to follow, or to command the attention of the listener. Tonight such rhetorical devices are not necessary. If this nation is in a crisis, deep and pervasive, it does not have to be announced -- it is in the air -- you and I feel it, and know its depth.

There are so many matters on the foreign policy agenda we could discuss -- matters of great importance to our world, our country and each one of us; matters that were of great concern to President John Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy. We could speak of Latin America; of those twenty-five Republics that share this hemisphere, where 30% of the population die before the age of 40, where often 10% of the people own over 90% of the land, where poverty, malnutrition and disease are so blatant that an early death among children is often welcomed.

We could speak of the Alliance for Progress -- that program and promise of President Kennedy's that has become so tattered that we have watched 13 constitutional governments overthrown in 9 years, that we freely support 11 military regimes, including that in Brazil with its 10,000 political prisoners and torture machines. We could speak of this tonight.

Or we could address ourselves to apartheid in South Africa and oppression in Rhodesia, and ask, as Robert Kennedy did, how in this day can such primitive forms of government exist? We could explore our moral obligation and speculate on whether or not man has truly advanced from the animal state, all the while heading toward serious introspection on matters of equality and race here at home. For we know, in the area of civil rights, we in America are in a period of regression. We could speak of that tonight.

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Or the Middle East, where two and a half million Jews vow not to be thrown into the sea, while their adversaries have employed the pilots and war machinery of another great power. This confrontation holds out little hope for world peace and I am sure that we have moral responsibilities that must be explored and discussed. We could talk all evening about that.

Or of the Salt Talks, or of overpopulation, or the misery that engulf the southern half of this planet and the wars and potential wars that may develop unless we break from the view that peace is only secured through missiles and megatons. We could talk about that tonight, for it would all be both fitting and proper in this forum.

But we cannot give our time and energy to these problems, for our minds are pinned down, as are our men, in that degrading and immoral struggle in Indochina. Try to raise your mind to hopeful thoughts, try to lift your voice in defense of our nation, and her role in the world, seek to impress a foreign visitor with pledges of compassion and commitment to peace -- try to do that and Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia will drag you back down to the reality of a war that robs us of the best in us, and makes our voice ring hollow in the world.

But tonight, the news from across the nation is news of unrest, turmoil and dissention. Soldiers are emplaced where students live, universities are shutting down, cancelling classes, examinations and commencements. Marches are planned, speeches are given, police are on the alert or in the streets -- all because of a serious failure of our institutions to meet their responsibilities, all because of a serious misunderstanding on the part of our President and this nation's leadership of what this country now considers to be a moral, not a military, question.

For that is what the war in Indochina has finally come down to -- not a question of military defeat, of military humiliation, of a physical loss of face. What is now at issue is how a great nation, persisting in this effort can end it in such a way that we as a people do not suffer an inner defeat, an inner humiliation, a loss of moral face -- and all the values we profess to hold.

We are a people of compassion, we choose to believe. Yet we have used our technology, our machinery, and even our men to wreak havoc on a small nation that cannot comprehend our intentions. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese civilians have died or been mangled for our definition of what is in their best interest.

We are a people committed to law, to the Democratic process, and the well established cross-checks on our great institutions of government. Yet without permission, consultation or forewarning, our leaders have chosen to invade the sovereign territory of another state, wiping out villages, driving people from their homes, in search of some bunkers or telephones or rifles -- again to satisfy our view of what is in their, and our, best interests.

We are a people whose basic nature, and indeed whose survival, has caused us more often than not to place trust and respect in our leadership, fully expecting that trust and respect to be mutual and reciprocal. Yet today we see the loss of those affections and regards, and a retreat to name-calling and repression, so that a few men, a very few, can carry on a war as they wish, without the hindrance of questions from a free society.

We are a people who value life, who formed a revolution to protect the rights of man, who have always looked to the hope and promise of youth. Yet today youth is the enemy, every campus a sanctuary harboring a conspiracy that requires men with loaded weapons to control.

So in reality, what are we? We are a people in deep trouble, torn by war, distrustful of government and its pronouncements. But we cannot remain this way if we are to remain anything at all. This state of affairs cannot be

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permitted to continue without risking every good, every hope, every dream, that brought this nation through her two centuries of life.

And so it is, meeting in an international forum, our attention tonight must be focussed on perhaps the most important international crisis facing the entire world tonight -- the internal dissension in the United States of America, the alienation of her people, the unchecked expansion of the power of her leadership, and all this means, not only for America's future, but that of the world.

Last Thursday evening the President of the United States announced the invasion of Cambodia. We were shocked, we were hurt. For most people felt that there was a tacit understanding in our country that the direction of activities in Southeast Asia was going the other way.

After years of debate, of confrontation, of strenuous argument and political upheaval, the American people seemed to conclude that Vietnam as a fact of life was on the wane. So certain were many that this matter had been settled that we celebrated Earth Day on April 15th and turned our minds to inner tubes and beer cans, auto exhaust and smoke stacks. The Vietnam Moratorium Committee was forced to close its doors for lack of funds and interest. But then last Thursday changed all that, and ecology is on the back burner, for Southeast Asia has come undone.

In retrospect, what right had this nation to expect that those enamored with the illusion of a military victory would acquiesce to our fondest dreams? Who ever guaranteed us that the chauvinistic phrases about the flag, about protecting our boys, about my country right or wrong, were carefully wrapped and stored away? What had those opposed to this war done to insure that the energy of their dissent was finally locked into our political process in such a way that the national will could not be reversed? In all truth, little had been done. And so, after three invasions of a new country, after four massive air strikes of North Vietnam, and after brutal deaths at Kent State University, we are back again to ground zero -- holding convocations, expressing our mutual frustrations, the young planning marches, and their elders forming committees of eminent citizens.

The error apparently was ours. All should have realized that the natural inclination of unchecked force is to be forceful. For once the scene had quieted, once those seeking peace and disengagement were so silent they could be abused by high officials, once the media had learned its lesson, our leaders resumed the high level of war. Force did what force will always do, it moved, releasing its potential in thousands of men, hundreds of planes, and the clanking of tanks through the monsoon rains.

All the energy of might, held in abeyance for the times to be politically right, was released for that one last try, that thrust of anger across a border in a blind search for those who had brought our military prowess so low. And so those of us who feel strongly on matters of war and peace were hurt, and we felt betrayed.

But again the error was ours, for all that had been accomplished by past expressions of dissent was symbolized by Vietnamization and the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. Unfortunately this proved to be more gossamer than cloth. For we who differ had not, in hard political terms, nailed it all down.

So we must start again. But I would warn you, as one who shares your frustrations and aspirations, that if we simply rely on past practices of expression we will fail again. For the signs of a new but meaningless accommodation are present. The United States, we are told, will now go no further than 30 kilometers into a place we have no business being in at all. And, we are told, we will remove ourselves by June 30th from a country we will have been in eight weeks too long. Finally, we are told, there will be no more "reinforced protective reaction" air-strikes in the North. Whether or not all this is true, or will prove to be true, now depends on what those who stand in opposition elect to do.

For myself, the course that the Congress of the United States must take is clear. We who have control over the appropriation of money must exercise that control and do it without delay. No more funds can be appropriated to the military, now and in the future, without a prohibition in law against the use of American men, planes, or other military equipment in Cambodia. Similarly, restrictions must be placed on funds for Vietnam that would guarantee the completion of withdrawal from that place, by making it financially impossible to stay there. This is a function of the U.S. Senate that can be constructive and firm, and I mean to work for it.

There can be no more reliance on resolutions, no more reliance on meetings and tacit understandings. Late though it is, and slow that we came to it, the hard step must now be taken to deny the President the arbitrary powers that he has assumed.

As for yourselves, I wish to take the liberty of suggesting that many expressions of dissent are not helpful to the cause many young people profess to serve. What is the purpose of dissent in a matter of this importance? Is it simply to gratify ourselves, to undertake our individual act of bravado, no matter how meaningless, simply for the admiration of those who happen to observe it?

Surely it is not that. Then what is the purpose of dissent? It is to end the war by bringing about real political change. It is to attract through argument and deed those who still falter in questioning an executive decision, regardless of their uneasiness with it. It is to make the opposition to our policies in Southeast Asia grow and expand into a political force of consequence, not shrink into the property of a narrow group comfortable in their own reassurances.

And how should dissent be expressed? If you are opposed to the use of violence in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, then you can never resort to violence, no matter what the provocation, no matter how burning the issue here at home. For violence has no reward; violence is an act of self-indulgence; violence is an admission of the lack of power; violence has no morality in it -- all that it leaves in the crucibles's ashes is the bitter dust of hate; violence seeks to cause pain, not reform; violence deals the final injustice to the sincerity of your views. It is the one act awaited by your antagonists to prove their point; it is the act that will ultimately bring repression. Physical violence has no place in America, it has no place in you or your cause.

And violence of the word is the same. It is demeaning and creates scars that have nothing to do with the issue before us. To call a police officer a "pig" is sheer malice and a hateful act, to cry "burn" or "kill", or use common vulgarities, is not the act of any man who professes to celebrate life and the dignity of man above all else.

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These are not the words of men of peace. We must leave those abuses to those who need them to express themselves. If one of the highest officials in the government finds his cause so weak or his position so insecure that he must constantly provoke and antagonize -- that is his prerogative. Perhaps he just may have nothing else to say to America. But it is not your prerogative if you wish to stand against the war and bring others to your cause. If the President of the United States wishes to use a word from the street to describe American students, that is his loss -- it may demean his office but it does not demean the student. There is, then, no justification in saying that because those in power resort to violence or name-calling, those expressing a different view can do the same. For the object of dissent is not revenge but change. And if any act does not contribute to the change we seek it is a negative and unworthy act.

So I would stress to all, young and old alike, who feel compelled to take some form of stand on the question of war, to do it in such a way that it will end war -- to do it in such a way that it is helpful to someone other than yourself. For dissent is not fun, it is not a lark, it is not time off from school and the personal responsibilities of life -- people have died for it here at home, and thousands more will die abroad if it fails to be effective.

I would implore you to realize your own power to be effective. The political experiences of 1968 have proven that when young people are active in the political arena, they can be the most forceful element in the country. Work, then, for those who seek office and seek peace. Work in your own way, using your education and skills to convince others that war unrelated to survival is not a natural act of great nations -- it is unnatural. Work to promote discussion and dialogue to draw out the views of those in all levels of power too timorous to be committed. One great university has chosen to stay in session now, but to close in the fall prior to elections so that the students may work as a memorial to those who died. Surely your imagination and drive can open countless avenues by which you can be effective.

But you must work to change this country, for it is yours to have and to give to your children.

Above all, let us never again desert this issue of Vietnam until it leaves us. No matter how much adrenalin there is in other causes, in other issues -- it is the war that must end first -- for it is most harmful to all living things.